

and the Democrats, at the time, could do little but protest since they had passed the legislation by which the assembly acted back in 1876. Outspoken prominent leaders such as Alfred Moore Waddell and Hugh McRae brought statewide attention to the situation in Wilmington, giving the Democratic Party a focal point for charges of Fusionist corruption and “Negro domination” in the election campaign of 1898.

Furnifold M. Simmons, State Democratic Party Chairman, set the strategy early in the campaign. Having discovered some misappropriations and larceny of public property in the Fusionist administration of the state penitentiary, he extended the accusations of corruption, graft, and incompetency to all Fusionist governments from the state level to the municipal. Democrats singled out Wilmington, in particular, as a city dominated by ignorant blacks, a “deplorable condition that operated to check enterprise, arrest development, and produce stagnation.” Furthermore, charged the Democrats, the Wilmington government had plunged the city deep into debt, had been unable, or unwilling, to control crime, and a black dominated court system allowed members of their race to violate laws with impunity. A check of the few reliable records fails to substantiate charges of domination and corruption.

The Board of Aldermen was composed of four African Americans and six whites. While there were numerous black officeholders, most were in minor positions and unable to dictate public policy. The claim that blacks were ignorant does not stand scrutiny since the black male literacy rate was higher than that of the whites (1,906 to 1,202), but literacy alone does not imply competency. To address that question and others, a check was made of the minutes of the Board of Aldermen from 1895 to 1898. The continual efforts of the city leaders to encourage progress through construction are evident in the numbers of building permits issued: the Sanitary Committee received regular orders to make recommendations for improved health conditions; nearly every session directed street repairs and new lighting; and cultural activity was not neglected as repairs and renovations were ordered for the Opera House. As to the claim of stagnation and indifference, the Wilmington city government under the Fusion regime seemed to carry on business as usual, no better but no worse than its predecessors.

That the Republicans and blacks squandered money and drove the city into deeper debt cannot be verified in the records; in fact, the minutes show quite the opposite. The aldermen drafted a meticulous and fair tax code and regularly reviewed its provisions. They were hampered, however, in collecting revenue as indicated by the presence of books of “back taxes due.” Thus, lack of citizen cooperation and the inability to obtain the necessary funds for operations, not squandering or graft, produced the debt of which the Democrats complained. Interestingly, white Democrats owned most of the property and wealth of the city from which the bulk of the tax money was obtained. In 1898, the aldermen attempted to relieve some of the debt by calling in burdensome municipal bonds